

Administration of Barack Obama, 2012

Remarks at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, Florida
April 10, 2012

The President. Hello, Florida! Thank you! How is everybody doing today? Well, it is great to be back in Florida. It is great to be back in Boca. Great to be here at the home of the Fighting Owls.

I want to, first of all, thank Ayden not only for leading us in the Pledge of Allegiance, but also giving me great details about the burrowing owls. *[Laughter]* He explained it all to me. And then he told me he wants my job. *[Laughter]* And I explained to him that the Constitution requires you are 35 years old. *[Laughter]* So I will keep the seat warm for him for a few more years.

I want to thank Rebecca for that extraordinary performance. In addition to having an unbelievable singing voice, she wants to be a teacher—she is an English major—and we need great teachers out there, so we're very proud of her.

I want to thank your president, M.J. Saunders, the mayor of Boca Raton, Susan Whelchel, for hosting us here today. We've also got our outstanding Senator and former astronaut—which is very cool—Bill Nelson in the house. A wonderful Congressman, Ted Deutch is here. And my great friend, Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz is here. And you are here, which is very exciting. I am glad you guys came out. Now——

Audience member. We love you.

The President. I love you back. I do.

Now look, guys, I know this is a busy time of year. Some of you are less than a month away from graduation. *[Applause]* Some seniors in the house. Pretty soon, you'll be closing the books at Wimberly for the last time. Maybe you'll be making that one last trip to the beach or Coyote Jack's. We'll be—you'll be picking up that diploma that you worked so hard for. Your parents will be there; they'll be beaming, full of pride. And then comes what folks call the real world.

Now, I actually think college is part of the real world. But obviously, there's a transition that will take place as you leave college. And some of you may go on to postgraduate degrees, but some of you are going to be out there looking for work. College is the single-most important investment you can make in your future. So I'm proud that you've made it and you've seen it through.

But I also know that the future can be uncertain. Now, we've gone through the 3 toughest years in our lifetimes, economically—worst financial crisis, worst economic crisis. Our economy is now recovering, but it's not yet where it needs to be. Too many of your friends and too many of your neighbors are still hurting out there. They're still looking for work. Too many of your families are still searching for that sense of security that started slipping away long before this recession hit.

Audience member. Amen. *[Laughter]*

The President. Got the amen corner here. *[Laughter]*

So at a time like this, we've got to ask ourselves a central, fundamental question as a nation: What do we have to do to make sure that America is a place where, if you work hard, if

you're responsible, that that hard work and that responsibility pays off? And the reason it's important to ask this question right now is because there are alternative theories.

There's a debate going on in this country right now: Could we succeed as a nation where a shrinking number of people are doing really, really well, but a growing number are struggling to get by? Or are we better off when everybody gets a fair shot and everybody does a fair share and everybody plays by the same set of rules?

That's what the debate in America is about right now. This is not just another run-of-the-mill gabfest in Washington. This is the defining issue of our time. This is a make-or-break moment for the middle class and everybody who's aspiring to get into the middle class. And we've got two very different visions of our future. And the choice between them could not be clearer.

Now keep in mind, I start from the belief that Government cannot and should not try to solve every single problem that we've got. Government is not the answer to everything. My first job in Chicago, when I wasn't much older than most of you, was working with a group of Catholic churches on the South Side of Chicago in low-income neighborhoods to try to figure out how could we improve the schools, and how could we strengthen neighborhoods and strengthen families. And I saw that the work that some of these churches did did more good for people in their communities than any Government program could.

In those same communities, I saw that no education policy, no matter how well-crafted it is, no matter how well funded it is, can take the place of a parent's love and attention. And I also believe that since Government is funded by you that it has an obligation to be efficient and effective. And that's why we've eliminated dozens of programs that weren't working, announced hundreds of regulatory reforms to save businesses and taxpayers billions of dollars. We've put annual domestic spending on a path to become the smallest share of our economy since Eisenhower was in the White House, which is before I was born much less you being born. *[Laughter]*

I believe the free market is the greatest force for economic progress in human history. But here's the thing. I also agree with our first Republican President, a guy from my home State, a guy with a beard, named Abraham Lincoln. And what Lincoln said was that through our Government, we should do together what we cannot do as well for ourselves. That's the definition of a smart Government.

And that's the reason why we have a strong military, to keep us safe, because I suppose each of us could just grab whatever is around the house and try to defend our country, but we do better when we do it together. And we've got the best military in the history of the world, with the greatest men and women in uniform. We pay for that.

That's why we have public schools to educate our children. If we didn't have public schools, there would still be some families who would do very well. They could afford private schools or some would home-school. But there would be a lot of kids who would fall through the cracks. So we do that together.

It's one of the reasons that we've laid down railroads and highways. We can't build a highway for ourselves. We got to get our neighbors and our friends to say let's go build a road. That's why we supported the research and the technology that saved lives and created entire industries. The Internet, GPS, all those things were created by us together, not by ourselves.

It's the reason why we contribute to programs like Medicare and Medicaid and Social Security and unemployment insurance. Because we understand that no matter how responsibly we live our lives, we know that eventually we're going to get older. We know that at any point, one of us might face hard times or bad luck or a crippling illness or a layoff. And the idea that together we build this safety net, this base of support, that allows all of us to take risks and to try new things, and maybe try—get a new job—because we know that there's this base that we can draw on.

So these investments—in things like education and research and health care—they haven't been made as some grand scheme to redistribute wealth from one group to another. This is not some socialist dream. They have been made by Democrats and Republicans for generations, because they benefit all of us and they lead to strong and durable economic growth. That's why we've made these investments.

If you're here at FAU because you got financial aid or a student loan, a scholarship, which, by the way, was how I was able to help finance my college education. That's how Michelle got her college education. That doesn't just benefit you. It benefits whatever company might end up hiring you and profiting from your skills. If one of you goes on to become the next Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckerberg or one of you discovers the next medical breakthrough, think about all the people whose lives will be changed for the better. We made an investment in you; we'll get a return on the investment.

When we guarantee basic security for the elderly or the sick or those who are actively looking for work, that doesn't make us weak. What makes us weak is when fewer Americans can afford to buy the products that businesses are selling, when fewer people are willing to take risks and start their new business, because if it doesn't work out they worry about feeding their families. What drags our entire economy down is when the benefits of economic growth and productivity go only to the few, which is what's been happening for over a decade now, and gap between those at the very, very top and everybody else keeps growing wider and wider and wider and wider.

In this country, prosperity has never trickled down from the wealthy few. Prosperity has always come from the bottom up, from a strong and growing middle class. That's how a generation who went to college on the GI bill, including my grandfather, helped build the most prosperous economy that the world has ever known. That's why a CEO like Henry Ford made a point to pay his workers enough money so that they could buy the cars that they were building. Because he understood, look, there's no point in me having all this and then nobody can buy my cars. I've got to pay my workers enough so that they buy the cars, and that in turn creates more business and more prosperity for everybody.

This is not about a few people doing well. We want people to do well. That's great. But it's about giving everybody the chance to do well. That's the essence of America. That's what the American Dream is about. That's why immigrants have come to our shores, because the idea was, you know what, it doesn't matter what your name is, what you look like—you can be named Obama—[laughter]—you can still make it if you try.

And yet, we keep on having the same argument with folks who don't seem to understand how it is that America got built. And let me just say, the folks that we have political arguments with, they're Americans who love their country. Democrats, Republicans, Independents, everybody, we all love this country. But there is a fundamental difference in how we think we move this country forward.

These folks, they keep telling us that if we just weaken regulations that keep our air or our water clean or protect our consumers, if we would just convert these investments that we're making through our Government in education and research and health care, if we just turned those into tax cuts, especially for the wealthy, then somehow the economy is going to grow stronger. That's the theory.

And here's the news: We tried this for 8 years before I took office. We tried it. It's not like we didn't try it. [Laughter] At the beginning of the last decade, the wealthiest Americans got two huge tax cuts—2001, 2003. Meanwhile, insurance companies, financial institutions, they were all allowed to write their own rules or find their way around rules. We were told the same thing we're being told now: This is going to lead to faster job growth; this is going to lead to greater prosperity for everybody.

Guess what, it didn't. [Laughter] Yes, the rich got much richer. Corporations made big profits. But we also had the slowest job growth in half a century. The typical American family actually saw their incomes fall by about 6 percent even though the economy was growing, because more and more of that growth was just going to a few, and the average middle class American wasn't seeing it in their paychecks. Health care premiums skyrocketed. Financial institutions started making bets with other people's money that were reckless. And then our entire financial system almost collapsed. You remember that? It wasn't that long ago. I know you guys are young, but it was pretty recent. [Laughter]

Now, some of you may be science majors in here. I like that. We need more scientists, need more engineers. Now I was not a science major myself, but I enjoyed science when I was young. And if I recall correctly, if an experiment fails badly—[laughter]—you learn from that, right? Sometimes you can learn from failure. That's part of the data that teaches you stuff, that expands our knowledge. But you don't then just keep on doing the same thing over and over again. You go back to the drawing board. You try something different. But that's not what's been happening with these folks in Washington.

A lot of the folks who were peddling these same trickle-down theories—including Members of Congress and some people who are running for a certain office right now, who shall not be named—[laughter]—they're doubling down on these old broken-down theories. Instead of moderating their views even slightly, instead of saying, you know what, what we did really didn't work and we almost had a second great depression, and maybe we should try something different, they have doubled down.

They proposed a budget that showers the wealthiest Americans with even more tax cuts and then pays for these tax cuts by gutting investments in education and medical research and clean energy, in health care.

Now, these are the facts. If the cuts they're proposing are spread out evenly across the budget, then 10 million college students—including some of you—would see your financial aid cut by an average of more than \$1,000 each.

Now, thousands of medical research grants for things like Alzheimer's and cancer and AIDS would be eliminated. Tens of thousands of researchers and students and teachers could lose their jobs. Our investments in clean energy that are making us less dependent on imported oil would be cut by nearly a fifth.

By the time you retire, instead of being enrolled in Medicare like today's seniors are, you'd get a voucher to pay for your health care plan. But here's the problem. If health care costs rise faster than the amount of the voucher, like they have been for decades, the rest of it comes out

of your pockets. If the voucher isn't enough to buy a plan with the specific doctors and care that you need, you're out of luck. And by the middle of the next century—by the middle of this century—excuse me—by about 2050, at a time when most of you will have families of your own, funding for most of the investments I've talked about today would have been almost completely eliminated altogether.

Now, this is not an exaggeration. This is math. And when I said this about a week ago, the Republicans objected. They said, we didn't specify all these cuts. Well, right, you didn't because you knew that people wouldn't accept them. So you just gave a big number and so what we've done is we've just done the math. This is what it would mean.

They say, well, we didn't specifically propose to cut student loans. Okay, if you don't cut student loans, then that means you've got to cut basic research even more. The money has got to come from somewhere. You can't give over \$4 trillion worth of additional tax cuts, including to folks like me who don't need them and weren't asking for them, and it just comes from some magic tree somewhere. [*Laughter*]

So if you hear them saying, well, the President is making this stuff up. No, we're doing the math. If they want to dispute anything that I've said right now, they should show us specifically where they would make those cuts. They should show us. They should show us. Because, by the way, they're not proposing to cut defense, they're actually proposing to increase defense spending, so it's not coming out of there. So show me.

Look, America has always been a place where anybody who's willing to work and play by the rules can make it. A place where prosperity doesn't trickle down from the top, it grows from the bottom; it grows outward from the heart of a vibrant middle class.

And I believe that we cannot stop investing in the things that help create that middle class; that create real, long-lasting, broad-based growth in this country. And we certainly shouldn't be doing it just so the richest Americans can get another tax cut. We should be strengthening those investments. We should be making college more affordable. We should be expanding our investment in clean energy.

Now here's the other thing that the Republicans will tell you. They'll say, well, we've got to make all these drastic cuts because our deficit is too high. Our deficit is too high. And their argument might actually have a shred of credibility to it if you didn't find out that they wanted to spend \$4.6 trillion on lower tax rates. I don't know how many of you are math majors, business majors—you can't pay down a deficit by taking in \$4.6 trillion of less money, especially when you're denying that you're going to be making all these cuts. It doesn't add up. It doesn't make sense.

And keep in mind, more than a trillion dollars of the tax cuts they propose would be going to people who make more than \$250,000 a year. That is an average of at least \$150,000—again, we're just taking the numbers with the details they've given us and you spread it out—that averages to at least \$150,000 for every millionaire, billionaire in the country. Each millionaire and billionaire, on average, would get \$150,000. Some folks would get a lot more.

So we did some math of our own. We added up all the investments \$150,000 could pay for. All right? So let's say a tax break that I might get that I really don't need—I've got—treated pretty well in this life. [*Laughter*] So right now, I'm going to be okay. Malia, Sasha, they're going to be able to go to college. Michelle is doing fine. So understand what this means.

Here's what \$150,000 means—\$150,000, this is what each millionaire and billionaire would get, on average. This could pay for a tax credit that would make a year of college more affordable for students like you, plus a year's worth of financial aid for students like you, plus a year's worth of prescription drug savings for one of your grandparents, plus a new computer lab for this school, plus a year of medical care for a veteran in your family who went to war and risked their lives fighting for this country, plus a medical research grant for a chronic disease, plus a year's salary for a firefighter or police officer—\$150,000 could pay for all of these things combined. Think about that.

So let me ask you, what's the better way to make our economy stronger? Do we give another \$50,000 in tax breaks to every millionaire and billionaire in the country? Or should we make investments in education and research and health care and our veterans?

And I just want to emphasize again—look, I want folks to get rich in this country. I think it's wonderful when people are successful. That's part of the American Dream. It is great that you make a product, you create a service, you do it better than anybody else, that's what our system is all about. But understand, the share of our national income going to the top 1 percent has climbed to levels we haven't seen since the 1920s. The folks who are benefitting from this are paying taxes at one of the lowest rates in 50 years.

You might have heard of this, but Warren Buffett is paying a lower tax rate than his secretary. Now, that's wrong. That's not fair. And so we've got to choose which direction we want this country to go in. Do we want to keep giving those tax breaks to folks like me who don't need them or give them to Warren Buffet—he definitely doesn't need them—*[laughter]*—or Bill Gates—he's already said, I don't need them. Or do we want to keep investing in those things that keep our economy growing and keep us secure? That's the choice.

And, Florida, I've told you where I stand. So now it's time for Members of Congress to tell you where they stand. In the next few weeks, we're going to vote on something called the Buffett rule, very simple: If you make more than \$1 million a year—now, I'm not saying you have a million dollars—right? I'm not saying you saved up all your money and you made smart investments and now you've got your nest egg and you're preparing for retirement. I'm saying, you're bringing in a million bucks or more a year. Then, what the rule says is you should pay the same percentage of your income in taxes as middle class families do. You shouldn't get special tax breaks. You shouldn't be able to get special loopholes.

And if we do that, then it makes it affordable for us to be able to say for those people who make under \$250,000 a year—like 98 percent of American families do—then your taxes don't go up. And we can still make those investments in things like student loans and college and science and infrastructure and all the things that make this country great.

And this is where you come in. This is why I came to see you. I mean, it's nice to see you. The weather is nice; you guys have been a wonderful audience. I learned about the burrowing owl. So there were all kinds of reasons for me to want to come down here. But one of the reasons I came was I want you to call your Members of Congress. I want you to write them an e-mail. I want you to tweet them. *[Laughter]* Tell them don't give tax breaks to folks like me who don't need them. Tell them to start investing in the things that will help the economy grow. Tell them if we want to bring down our deficit sensibly, then we've got to do it in a balanced way that's fair for everybody. Remind them who they work for. Tell them to do the right thing.

As I look out across this gymnasium, everybody here—from all different backgrounds, from all different parts of the country—each of us is here because somebody, somewhere, felt responsibility for other people. Our parents, obviously, our grandparents, great-grandparents, the sacrifices they made—some of them took enormous risks coming to this country with nothing because they wanted to give a better life to their kids and their grandkids. A lot of them did without so that you could benefit. But they weren't just thinking about their families. They were thinking about their communities. They were thinking about their country.

That's what responsibility means. It means that as you have greater and greater opportunity, then the scope of you being able to help more people and think about the future expands. And so you're not just thinking about yourself; you're thinking about your kids, your spouse, your family, your grandkids, your neighborhood, your State, your nation. You're thinking about the future.

And now it's our turn to be responsible. Now it's our turn to preserve the American Dream for future generations. Now it's our turn to rebuild, to make the investments that will assure our future, to make sure that we've got the most competitive workforce on Earth, to make sure that we've got clean energy that can help clean the planet and help fuel our economy.

It's our turn. It's our turn to rebuild our roads and our bridges and our airports and our ports. It's our turn to make sure that everybody here, every child born in whatever neighborhood in this country it is, that if they're willing to dream big dreams and put some blood, sweat and tears behind it, they can make it.

I know we can do that. I know we can do it because of you. You're here because you believe in your future. You're working hard. Some of you are balancing a job or a family on the side.

You have faith in America. You know it's not going to be easy, but you don't give up. That's the spirit we need right now, because here in America we don't give up. Here in America, we look out for one another. Here in America, we help each other get ahead. Here in America, we have a sense of common purpose. Here in America, we can meet any challenge. Here in America, we can seize any moment. We can make this century another great American century.

Thank you. God bless you. God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:05 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Ayden Maher, and Rebecca Guillaume, students, and Mary Jane Saunders, president, Florida Atlantic University; Mark E. Zuckerberg, founder and chief executive officer, Facebook; Warren E. Buffett, chief executive officer, and Debbie Bosanek, assistant, Berkshire Hathaway Inc.; and William H. Gates III, chairman, Microsoft, Inc.

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